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**W**hen my colleagues and I first spied the Shaxi Valley from atop a mountain ridge in 1999, we were struck by its scenic beauty. We desperately wanted to explore the valley, but, unfortunately, Shaxi was not on the official itinerary provided by our host, the government of Jianchuan County, which had invited us to this remote region in the Himalayan foothills to discuss a variety of development opportunities. Our hosts considered Shaxi of little interest to the outside world, being no more than a patchwork of farms with a dilapidated old market town in its center.

With a little cajoling, however, our guides agreed to take us down into the valley, along worn narrow horse paths, to scope it out. Upon our arrival in town, we were greeted by local representatives, eager to show us Shaxi's historic center and beautifully proportioned old market square. Although it had been more than two decades since the last transactions took place in the square and its buildings were in a most desperate state of disrepair, we were fascinated by what we saw. The square was carefully paved with local red sandstone slabs, surrounded by shops with exquisitely carved woodwork, with intact protecting gates, an open-air theater, a merchants' guesthouse, and an extensive Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) temple district. With its unique combination of economic, social, religious, and cultural facilities, we knew such a magnificent

C H I N A

• Shaxi

# Market Value

**SAVING SHAXI, THE LAST REMAINING TRADING**

**POST ON THE TEA AND HORSE CARAVAN TRAIL**

**FROM YUNNAN TO TIBET**

place must have been far more than just an ordinary rural market in years past.

During our discussions with local historians and village elders we were told that indeed Shaxi had once been an economic force to contend with in the region, having been an ancient caravan station on the lucrative tea and horse trade route from Yunnan to Tibet, a 3,500-km-long mercantile artery that flourished from the sixth century A.D. until well into the 1950s. Tea, cultivated in Xishuangbanna in the tropical south of Yunnan, was traded for horses bred in Tibet. In addition to revenues garnered from the tea trade, Shaxi also profited from the sale of salt mined in the vicinity.

Though lucrative, plying the caravan trail was a dangerous job due to an ever-present risk of falling prey to bandits. Guesthouses in Shaxi as in other trading towns offered rooms with storage compartments beneath the beds to protect the trade goods from theft. To ensure the safety of the village and the caravans, defensive gates and walls were built and guard posts were installed.

Over time, however, a village enveloped the market town, obscuring many of its original buildings in a sea of vernacular architecture, so much so that Shaxi's importance seemed all but lost to historians. We soon learned that the town had never been inventoried as an historical monument by the Chinese authorities. Moreover, this ancient trading post—with so much of its early architecture intact—was probably the last of its kind in southwestern China.

Many of the Shaxi elders with whom we spoke still remembered the caravans, trains of as many as 120 festively decorated horses or mules, trekking into the valley via the ancient trail, the clanging of bells about the animals' necks echoing through the valley. The caravans, they





A BLOCK OF TRADITIONAL HOUSES,  
ABOVE, AND AN ARCHITECT'S MODEL  
OF HOW SHAXI LOOKS TODAY. FACING  
PAGE, A DETAIL OF THE OPEN-AIR  
THEATER'S ORNATE CEILING. BELOW,  
A SECTION THROUGH XINGJIAO  
TEMPLE, FOUNDED IN 1412.





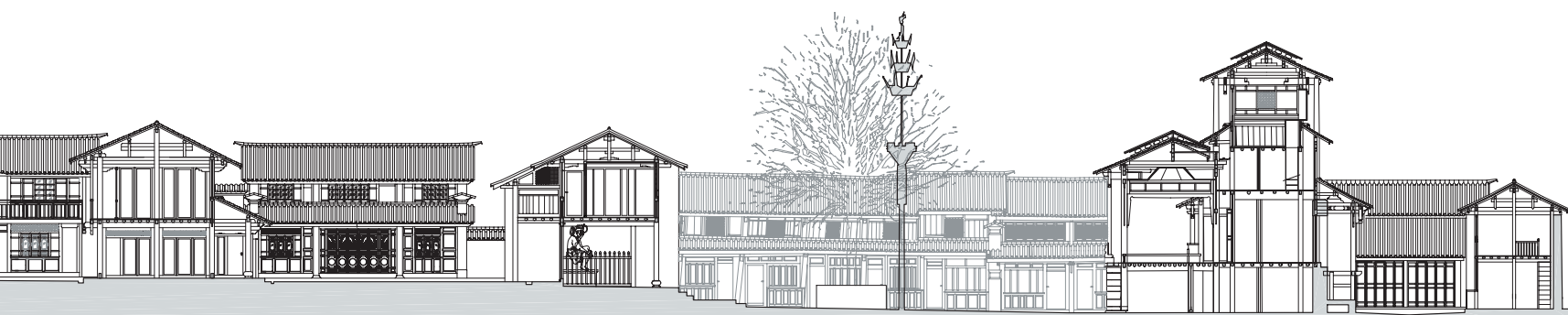
told us, were often led by Tibetans, but also by merchants of other ethnic origins—Bais, Yis, Han, or Naxi.

Today, 90 percent of the inhabitants of the Shaxi Valley belong to the Bai minority, a Tibetan-Burmese ethnic group that dominated southwestern China from the beginning of the seventh century until the Mongolian invasions of the thirteenth century. Since then, the Bai cultural sphere has contracted significantly. They are now concentrated mainly in Dali Prefecture, where Shaxi is located. The Bai share a distinct language, religion, dress, music, festivals, cuisine, and form of traditional architecture.

Following the Chinese Revolution in 1949 and the subsequent introduction of modern modes of transportation, caravan trade came to an abrupt end. Moreover, a new road linking Yunnan with Tibet bypassed Shaxi, relegating it to a virtual backwater. As a result, Shaxi fell into a slow decline. In the 1960s the Ming Dynasty Xingjiao Temple was appropriated for use as government offices and a school; in the 1980s, the village market was moved away from its historic location at the market square by government decree. Shops in the old market square were abandoned and left to decay. Ironically, it was the relocation of the marketplace that in large part contributed to its preservation, or rather prevented it from being disfigured by modern development. On the other hand, a lack of funds and public awareness of the importance of the town's historic structures also meant a lack of maintenance of any sort. With an annual income of around \$120 U.S., the majority of people in Shaxi live at or below the poverty line.

It was clear from our first visit that, without a comprehensive conservation program and funds to support it, the remains of the caravan station would soon disappear. We hastily prepared a nomination for Shaxi, hoping that it would be chosen for inclusion on WMF's 2002 list of the *100 Most Endangered Sites*. Such visibility, we reasoned, would encourage the local government and preservationists in China and abroad to take up the challenge of saving this wonderful town and restoring it to its former glory. To our delight, our old trading post made the list.

We knew from the outset that an isolated restoration project would not be sufficient to preserve the site unless measures were taken for its long-term stewardship. Without a maintenance plan, Shaxi would simply fall into decay again after a relatively short period. Thus, working with the local authorities, our Chinese-Swiss project team drew up a comprehensive preservation and development plan that took into account not only the restoration of the old market square, but also the preservation of the



surrounding historical village and the sustainable economic development of the Shaxi Valley as a whole.

In addition to developing feasible concepts for a functional re-use of Shaxi's historic buildings in order to justify their restoration, we knew that we also had to address a host of social and environmental issues, including the improvement of sanitation systems and the alleviation of poverty through appropriate microcredit schemes. These issues are critical components of the Shaxi Rehabilitation Project, the centerpiece of which remains the restoration of the old market square. In our estimation, Shaxi has the potential to once again become economically self-sustaining. This time, however, revenues would be earned through eco-tourism.

Prior to embarking on any restoration work, we carried out a comprehensive conditions assessment of Shaxi's historic buildings. We selected five structures that collectively represented the full range of conservation challenges we would be facing in the market square restoration and thus would make for an ideal training ground. Among these were a house at the corner of Tibet and East Alley and three old mansion gates—Ouyang, Sun, and Li. In addition to refining our conservation methods, we would need to reacquaint local craftsmen with materials and techniques that had long since fallen out of use in the region, as well as train them in modern approaches to restoration. Our goal throughout the project is to conserve and reuse as much original building material as possible, replacing only those elements deemed beyond repair.

By February 2004, our pilot projects had been completed, and it was time to address the market square itself, within which we had identified 15 distinct restoration projects. Three of these—the open-air theater, the Ming Dynasty Xingjiao Temple, and the *Lao Madien*, or the old guest-house—were declared priorities, being buildings of exceptional historical value and ideal candidates for adaptive reuse schemes. They will also serve as anchor points in the cultural and spiritual rebirth of the town.

The support structure of the open-air theater complex, which comprises seven buildings and a courtyard, had weakened substantially over time. During the restoration process, all non-load-bearing wooden elements were numbered, dismantled, repaired, cleaned, and reassembled, while load-bearing members were repaired in situ. Following restoration, the theater will once again be used for cultural events, with the courtyard serving as a backstage area during performances as well as a reception area for visitors. Several of the buildings will eventually house a museum dedicated to Bai culture and religion. To facilitate the theater's future reuse, we have upgraded its facilities, installing proper lighting, an ecological toilet, and a staircase to connect the courtyard to the theater and museum.

Founded in 1412, the Xingjiao Temple, among the oldest buildings in Shaxi, contains extraordinary frescoes dating to the Ming Dynasty. The complex, however, was modified over the centuries. To date we have finished work on the temple's first courtyard; however, the restoration

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of the entire building will take another two years to complete. When we are done, the temple, which had been appropriated as office space and a school following the Cultural Revolution, will resume its original function as the spiritual center of the town.

Restoration of the old guesthouse, an extraordinary wooden building with painted murals and a suite of courtyards, began this past May. It is our plan to have it once again host travelers—not merchants but tourists eager to ply a restored section of the ancient tea and horse caravan trail between the Shaxi Market and Shibao Mountain on the northwestern side of the valley. There they will be able to visit a suite of Tang and Song Dynasty Buddhist temples, grottoes, and chapels hewn out of the living rock between the eighth and twelfth centuries.

While it will be some time before we finish the entire market restoration, our project has already yielded some extraordinary results. Publicity following Shaxi's inclusion on the Watch list prompted provincial authorities to declare the town a place of historic cultural importance that warrants protection. More recently, WMF has awarded the site a total of \$270,000, through its Robert W. Wilson Challenge Program and a grant from American Express, which has been complemented by a \$350,000 commitment from the Chinese government.

Throughout the course of our project, we have been able to resuscitate craft industries such as intricate woodworking and building with clay that will be useful not only in our project but in the restoration of other historically significant buildings in the Shaxi region. In addition to the rehabilitation of the ancient marketplace, sanitary conditions in the village are being improved in an environmentally responsible way, so that townspeople can enjoy modern amenities. Complementing these efforts are programs to alleviate poverty and to preserve the local minority culture.

Today, many sites in the Himalayan foothills face the same challenges as those of the Shaxi Valley. Until now, however, there were no practical and sustainable development models. Our hope is that others will benefit from our experiences and knowledge. For us, Shaxi is far more than a mere restoration project. Our challenge is to preserve and sustain the cultural heritage of an ethnic minority within a traditional natural environment. ■

**ALTHOUGH SHAXI CEASED TO PLAY A VITAL ROLE IN CHINESE TRADE AFTER CONSTRUCTION OF A ROADWAY THAT BYPASSED THE VALLEY FOLLOWING THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION, MANY OF ITS ANCIENT DETAILS HAVE SURVIVED, ALBEIT IN A DESPERATE STATE OF DISREPAIR. THE BACK OF A HOUSE, FACING PAGE, AND A BARBERSHOP, ABOVE.**